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Title: Autobiographical Element in Anne Sexton's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

My research on "Autobiographical Element in Anne Sexton's Poetry", aims to probe into the authenticity of the contents of Anne Sexton's poetry which is said to be autobiographical in nature. It is a debatable issue according to some critics, as they believe that autobiographical poetry does not exist. If it did, it would be pure reportage of a poet's biographical information set down as verse, having little literary value. On the contrary some critics believe that autobiographical contents are true reflections of one's personality and serve a literary purpose. Against T.S Eliot's 'Impersonal Theory of Poetry', the poets who wrote in the confessional poetry mode could not keep their personal experiences and feelings detached from their poetry. Anne Sexton being one of the poets who wrote confessional poetry has poured down her innermost feelings in her poetry. She started writing poetry on the suggestion of her therapist and to a large extent it helped her to keep herself at peace. Some of her friends like Maxine Kumin have mentioned during an interview that writing poetry saved Anne Sexton's life and it was because of the poetry that she could live for so many years… otherwise there was a probability that she could have killed herself long back.

In order to study the autobiographical elements in Anne Sexton's poetry, an extensive study of Sexton's poems have been studied under two headings- Early Poetry and Later Poetry along with a deep and intensive study of her Biography written by Diane Wood Middlebrook and the Letters written by Anne Sexton to her friends, family members, publishers and her mentors.

Key Words: Autobiographical poetry, Psychoanalysis, suicide, Confessional poetry, biography, Controversy, Suicide, innermost feelings

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INTRODUCTION

Anne Sexton was a Pulitzer Prize winning American poet of the Twentieth Century. She was born in the New England suburb of Newton, Massachusetts on November 9, 1928. She got married as a young girl of eighteen and had her first child in 1952. She struggled with the psychological and physical demands of a child and gave birth to another child in 1955. She suffered post-partum depression which lasted for longer than normal in case of Anne Sexton. She wrote in the genre of 'Confessional Poetry,' which can be defined as an autobiographical mode of verse that reveals the poet's personal problems with unusual frankness. Through her poetry she 'confessed' the anguish of depression, addiction and a suicidal mother's love for her daughters and many more very private and personal experiences and emotions. In her style she combined the poetic form of lyric with characters and plots about adultery and death. The quality of her poetry made poetry appealing to even those who disliked it as it had an uncanny charm.

Anne Sexton's autobiographical narrative is a form that could express the complexity of life, the way it is rooted in a personal and social history. The way it gathers up our hopes and relentlessly requires us to play out the compelling issues of our lives, day after day. She explicated the themes of loss, reparation, narcissism and courage. Anne situates them well in social history and psychoanalytic theory.

Writing poetry in a 'Confessional manner' is a literary tradition that includes personal experience and voice of the poet. The term confessional poetry was first coined by M.L Rosanthal. According to the Academy of American poets, confessional poetry differs from the poetry of the sixteenth century because of its rejection of the standards for appropriate content. Some critics, like Howe argues, that confessional poetry is the one in which the writer speaks to the readers telling him something about his life. It unmasks the poet hiding behind and provides an insight into the private life of the poet. Sexton found this genre to be a channel of redeeming her unbearable emotional crisis and venting the repressed anger inside her. It was her analyst who told her to write between their sessions about what she was feeling, thinking and dreaming.

Sexton resorted to this poetic creativity as a home-made therapy to describe what was repressed, hidden or falsified within her. The poems written by Sexton are deeply rooted in her experiences.

She deliberately sank into the depth of herself to reveal her inner and contradictory feelings. Critics found that many of her poems such as, “To Bedlam and Part Way Back”, “All My Pretty Ones”, “Live or Die”, “Transformations” and “The Book of Folly” drew quite a lot of attention of the readers, but they believed that the demands made through them could not always be met.

On analyzing Sexton’s poetry, a psychoanalytical model is reflected which is concerned with her attempt to find an “Exit” out of the persistent emotional stress under which she had lived. She was subjected to nervous breakdowns and admitted to a neuropsychiatry hospital time and again. Anne Sexton strongly and openly challenged the society and its views through her poems. She was considered to be an outcast and a crazy woman by the members of the society as she did not agree to live as per the rules set up by the society for the women. She lived as per her own will ignoring the conservative views of the society.

Devastated by many aspects of her anxieties, and failing to find equilibrium of her own, she committed suicide in 1974.

The study aims to probe into the authenticity of the contents of Anne Sexton’s poetry which is said to be autobiographical in nature. It is a debatable issue according to some critics, as they believe that autobiographical poetry does not exist. If it did, it would be pure reportage of a poet’s biographical information set down as verse having little literary value.

The main idea to study Sexton’s poetry is aroused because of the controversy which involved Diana Middlebrook and Sexton’s daughters. The daughters raised a strong objection for calling Sexton’s poetry as confessional or autobiographical. They also challenged the information revealed in Anne Sexton’s biography written by Middlebrook to be false and fabricated. The releases of publication of audiotapes of Anne Sexton’s psychiatric sessions were found to be particularly troubling. Aside from some very serious ethical and moral issues, it was saddening that Anne Sexton’s remarks, made in some sort of hypnotic trance, were treated as statements of truth rather than what they were -- the perceptions of a seriously troubled woman who saw

alarming undertones in every kind word, and peril in the most innocent remark.

Anne Sexton could find a cloud in the sunniest sky, and used that talent as her means of remaining the center of attention. She clearly knew her melodramatic fears were groundless, so through writing poetry she chose -- a multifaceted, intentionally cryptic medium through which she could conveniently deny unprovoked attacks upon those who loved her and who worked tirelessly to provide the patience, understanding and attention she craved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to analyze the poet's work and justify the research problem, the following literature review was undertaken:

M.L Rosenthal, in his book*" Robert Lowell: a Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Thomas Parkinson* gives a detailed account of the Autobiographical and the Confessional poetry, their origin, the various stages of its development, the various forms it took with a treatment of different poets with special reference to Robert Lowell and his famous work ' Life Studies'. The book gives a detailed account of the historical perspective of the evolution of the new genre in the arena of literature. The coining of the term 'Confessional' is also clearly mentioned giving reference of the critic M.L Rosenthal's book *The New Poets* which says that the term 'Confessional Poetry' came naturally to Rosenthal's mind when he reviewed Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959. Perhaps, it came to mind of others just as naturally. Whoever, invented it, it was a term, both helpful and too limited.

The confessional poets created a disturbing often autobiographical poetic of pain that shocked the world with its raw anatomy of human suffering. Indebted to both Romantic poets and French Symbolists for their introspective ruminations on the darker realms, the movement dramatized everyday human angst with unsparing technical master, blurring boundaries between personal torment and political realities.

Middlebrook Diana Wood, *in* her book *Anne Sexton: A Biography* attempt to unravel the complex life of Anne Sexton. Diane Wood Middlebrook worked for more than five years on this project and successfully brought out many sides of the woman. While writing Sexton's

biography, Middlebrook had access to many of Sexton's papers, poetry drafts, the transcripts of many of her psychiatric sessions and interviews with people who were intimate with Sexton. Middlebrook painted a portrait of a woman as gifted as she was tormented, and as beautifully intense as she was insecure. Middlebrook has commented during one of her interviews on Sexton's biography that after collecting information about Anne Sexton she was sure about one thing that poets were always in love and there was a dynamism around them which made people desire to come too close to them.

The biography shows how it is that Sexton has rightfully come to be a feminist poetic icon. Erica Jong is quoted as saying in the book that 'If Anne had stuck around another ten years, the world might have caught up with her'. *Anne Sexton: A Biography* shows the innovation and beauty from many perspectives and provides its readers with more contexts than they most likely even thought possible.

Linda Gray Sexton*, in The Complete Poems,* Edited by Houghton Mifflin, has compiled eight books Anne Sexton sent to press during her lifetime, as well as one hundred and thirty pages of posthumously published poems. The book came with a forward written by Anne Sexton's closest friend Maxine Kumin and it also brought out important comments from the critics and renowned poets. After her death, her former mentor Robert Lowell wrote that her writings had become 'meager' and exaggerated. He jokingly referred to Sexton's late period as 'Bad Anne'. It was surprisingly noticed that the quality of poems declined in the three books- *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks* and *Awful Rowing towards God* which were published after Sexton's death.

Dr. Anwar Abd El Kareem Elsayed in his paper*, Autobiographical Poetry in the Twentieth Century* has attempted to compare between the features of Confessional poetry with Lyrical poetry and concluded that in some way the personal lyrical poetry expresses the poets' deepest feelings just like in a confessional poetry. Confessional poetry, as it is known, is a vortex into which the 'I' of the Romantics is caught in the act of psychological self-probing and blends with the realism often found in Russian storytellers. The poets write about their traumatic and chilling experiences of the body and mind- maladjustments in life, academic failures, sexual frustrations,

electric shock therapy in mental hospitals, and confinement in jails. In the face of modern problems, the subjects picked up are new but the pain is ancient and handled with a technical mastery that gives the poignancy a charm and grace unique to this entirely new direction of poetry.

Juhaz Suzanne *in* "Seeking the Exit or the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the career of Anne Sexton" has compared the poetry of Emily Dickenson and Anne Sexton. The work reflected the impact of Emily Dickinson on the Confessional writing of Sexton. Dickinson once wrote to her publisher about her experience which she could not share with anyone and which she expressed in poetry. Sexton too resorted to the poetic creativity as a homemade therapy.

The book concentrates on the origin and growth of being confessional in Anne Sexton's poetry and it discussed both the theory and the practices of confessional poetry.

Jon Rosenblatt, in *Sylvia Plath - The Poetry of Initiation* shows resemblance in writing patterns of two twentieth century prominent poets, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. The way the two confessional poets exposed the subliminal pain buried deep in their disturbed psyche with such touching sincerity, that the reader was unwillingly drawn towards their world and even found themselves identifying with their unusual state of mind. They had a personal charisma which was quite unique and which was reflected in their poetry.

Anne Sexton explored her abortions and depression, Sylvia Plath charted her suicidal tendencies. Confessional poetry's tone of guilt-ridden despair was not limited to their poetry. The movement lost many of its practitioners to suicide, including Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

Jyoti Sharma in *Confessional Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton* explains at length how Confessional poetry goes beyond personal element and reaches the deep recess of the subconscious, giving poetry an intensity that is sometimes so bleak and bare, so daringly real and harsh, that it is almost frightening. The book also touches upon how 'confessional' element is scattered throughout the ages and how as a 'school of poetry' or as a 'movement' it starts with Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. With its publication in 1958, critics searched for a term to label this 'new poetry'. Professor M.L Rosenthal was among the first critics to term the poetry of Lowell as 'Confessional'. Ever since Walt Whitman, father of American poetry, wrote the opening line

for *Song of Myself* "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" a spotlight has shone on the American poets' personality. The book *Confessional Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton,* gives an insight into the fascinating poetry of three major confessional poets of this unique genre.

*Gale, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. V: American Poets since World War II, d*escribes Anne Sexton as an outcast, since she was one of the modern women who did not give herself to the expectations of the traditional society rather she lived her own way and let society remained unchallenged in its views. She defined different women through her poetry. Anne Sexton's poetry is poetry of suffering, of mental disturbances and psychic distress, but the treatment has claim lucidity, even wit and mockery that surprisingly delights and disturbs us at the same time.

Paula M. Salvio*, in Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance,* brings a series of full realization, of the culture of 1950's, psychoanalytic theories. It also throws light on the appropriate distance between teacher and student relationship and between emotional life and knowledge.

The other **Journals referred** to are:

1. American Poetry in an Age of Construction, The Cambridge Quarterly (2003) 35(3): 205-230

2. Banerjee. Jacqueline, "Grief and The Modern Writer", English (1994) 43 (175):17-36

3. Brown Dennis, T.S Eliot's Ash Wednesday' and Four Quartets: Poetic Confession and Psychotherapy. Literature and Theology (2003) 17(1): 1-16

4. Maclean R. Alasdair, "United States: Incompetent Patient (PVS): Decision-making, Courts and Family", Med Law Rev (1997) 5(2): 245-256

5. Fanning John, "Principles of Mental Health Law and Policy", Med Law Rev. (Autumn 2011) 19(4): 669-674

6. Interview of Diane Wood Middlebrook on Anne Sexton – www.wiredforbooks.org/dianemiddlebrook/index , Feb, 8, 2013.

DESCRIPTION OF BROAD AREA

The research includes a survey of Autobiographical poetry in the Twentieth century, specifically the poetry of American author Anne Sexton, who wrote in the confessional genre. Autobiographical poetry can be defined as one in which the poet gives an account of his/her life, as well as self- revelation, self- exploration and "Thoughtful and Analytical excursions into the self" . The speaker in autobiographical poetry is not a persona but the poet himself. Very occasionally, an autobiographical poem is rather long, covering long periods in the poet's real life; however, it sometimes presents some fictional details. Sexton resorted to this poetic creativity as a home-made therapy to describe what was repressed, hidden or falsified within her. The poems written by Sexton are deeply rooted in her experiences. She deliberately sank into the depth of herself to reveal her inner and contradictory feelings.

Anne Sexton was a patient of depression and she frequently underwent therapy sessions. She was criticized of using her disability, her mental illness to get away with various things. She was accused of traumatizing and tyrannizing her family with her abusive mood and seducing her therapist into dealing with her as someone extra-ordinary.

This is an attempt to disapprove that the contents of her poetry are not jeopardized or prejudiced but truly autobiographical. In 1962 Sexton published *All My Pretty Ones*, which became so popular in England, that an edition of *Selected Poems* was published there as a Poetry Book Selection in 1964. In 1967 Sexton received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Live or Die* (1966), capping her accumulation of honors such as the Frost Fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference (1959), the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship (1961), the Levinson Prize (1962), the American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship (1963), the Shelley Memorial Prize (1967), and an invitation to give the Morris Gray reading at Harvard. To follow were a Guggenheim Fellowship, Ford Foundation grants, honorary degrees, professorships at Colgate University and Boston University, and other distinctions.

My proposal of Research is unique in itself as it proposes to answer the questions which are very pertinent for a researcher studying Anne sexton's poetry. My research attempts to know what

made Anne the way she was. Was it a psychological syndrome? Or was it circumstantial? How for is Anne Sexton's poetry really autobiographical and how relevant is it in today's world.

It also includes an attempt to find answers to the questions such as:

- Whether there was any relation and impact of Sexton's Psycho therapy and her writings
- What craftsmanship as a poet has she introduced to the world through her Confessional genre and
- Whether the surrogate decision making made the difference in raising an opinion about Sexton's poetry and Sexton herself as a woman of the modern world.
- The relevance of Sexton's poetry in the modern world.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To consider the inter relationship among Anne Sexton's poetry, her psychotherapy and her identity as a woman.
- To evaluate whether her poetry was a mere recording of her emotions on paper or a work of craftsmanship and includes use of prosody.
- To study the legal doctrine of surrogate decision-making: The issue raised by the release of Anne Sexton's therapy tapes, challenging the Doctor-Patient confidentiality
- To map out the Psychobiography of Anne Sexton to understand her true personality and her poetry

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research includes a Qualitative and an Explorative research. Analysis comprises of an intensive review of the relevant work of the author combined with a sufficient amount of

empirical evidence, based on Psycho-analysis. Biographical materials available related the poet would also be studied in order to establish the justification of the objective of research.

Basically, Library research methodology which includes analysis of themes procured from literary sources such as journals, online libraries, books etc are included. The research relies on the primary and the Secondary sources including comparative deliberation of the poetic works of confessional poets so as to reach analytical conclusions. The audio and video tapes of Anne Sexton's poetry reading events will also be studied.

Proposed objectives would be tried to reach on the basis of textual criticism, critical analysis, comparative analysis and interpretation of the poet's earlier and later works.

PROPOSED RESEARCH OUTCOME

The research proposes to find various aspects of Anne Sexton as a poet of confessional poetry. The effect of psychotherapy exercised on a woman could be miraculous and healing as in the case of Sexton, who was directed to pour her emotions and feelings in the form of poetry and find a new window or outlet to let out her pent up feelings leading her to lead a comparatively balanced life, which she missed due to her state of depression. The psychotherapy prescribed, helped her unravel her true personality as a poet. Her depression was expressed in a tangible manner therefore, bringing out her innermost and inbuilt talent of a poet, who could express her thoughts and feelings accurately on paper.

The language used in her poetry reflected her affair with the words, which intensified her feelings and successfully transferred the idea of the poet's heart to the readers. The readers were left in awe and could relate their own lives with that of the poet's. It took all the readers by surprise and her poetry became the talk of the town at all gatherings. The simplicity of the language and the absence of any complex structure appealed to the mass readers and drew their attention. I propose to find the reason for the universal appeal of Anne Sexton's poetry.

The release of Sexton's therapy tapes revealed Sexton to be a different personality all together. Her personality was interpreted differently earlier before the controversy dealing with the doctrine of surrogate decision making. After the release of her tapes, her personality was interpreted under a new light all together, revealing many new facets of her personality. I

propose to find out whether Anne Sexton's poetry is truly autobiographical or a powerful work of her imagination.

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